



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE THIRD COMMANDMENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

By ROBERT MACKINTOSH,
Scotland.

IN order to learn what this commandment can teach us regarding the evolution of sin, or regarding the evolution of moral ideals, our minds must plunge deep into the thoughts of the ancient world. The commandment treats of the appeal to God.¹ It requires that every such appeal should be made solemnly, candidly, truthfully. When the world was young, and when mankind was split up into a number of jealously hostile tribes—when every stranger was at the same time an enemy—then it was a great matter to secure little oases of peace and good order within the family circle, or the tribe, or the city, or the nation, and any bit of neutral ground was of great importance—any market place, or religious sanctuary, where strangers looked each other in the face and kept the peace; these small beginnings of justice and order were a sort of prophecy of a wider justice and a more stable order that should one day appear among mankind. And, as with justice and order, so with truth. When men left to themselves will not speak truth, when continued danger and frequent oppression have had their natural effect in developing a protective instinct of lying, so that, in speaking to a stranger, or to one in authority, the poor man naturally lies, lest he should happen to blurt out something that will be used against him, then it is of the greatest consequence to ascertain how men can be got to speak the truth in circumstances which make it urgently necessary to discover the whole truth. That is the origin of the judicial oath. An appeal is

¹ It is impossible here to estimate the value of the attempt of ethnology to dig deeper yet, tracing the oath to a belief in magical or automatic sanctions, independent of all theistic or polytheistic faith.

made to God; and thus, adjured by God—in fear of him, lest he punish perjury, and lest it prove more dangerous to offend God than to help government officials in their prying into men's affairs—thus, in the witness box, men begin to speak the truth. It is a very small beginning of truth speaking which is thus wrung out of the reluctant human conscience. It is in a very low form that the fear of God thus shows itself as the cement of human society. But a beginning has been made; and probably nothing except a directly religious sanction² would have extricated mankind from that miserable *impasse*, fatal to all progress, in which truth is regarded as a jewel, to be kept for one's friends or clansmen, and lies are the things one naturally offers to a stranger. Thus, in early times, courts of law, holding the balance as they do between rival claims, act as a means of education for the conscience, besides rendering service as pioneers of civilization and order. This procedure—the judicial oath—is sanctioned by the third commandment, which in so doing forbids perjury.

But in early society a second use is made of the direct appeal to God. Taught in courts of justice that by specially addressing yourself to God you can get him to take a specially close cognizance of the affairs of your life, men tried to make use of the practice for their own advantage in the form of the religious vow. This is, to say the least, much more prominent in the Old Testament than a formulated or technical, judicial oath. In its first shape the vow was a specially emphatic way of praying. It took the form of a bargain, proposed by the suppliant to God. Thus Jacob at Bethel says: "If God will be with me, and will keep me in the way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then shall Jehovah be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house, and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee." So,

² In the Old Testament we seem to have clearer evidence of putting the accused on oath than of administering an oath to ordinary witnesses. And perhaps the distinction of the ninth from the third commandment is not merely significant of a fresh point of view, but of the circumstance that, with the Hebrew, the appeal to God in judicial matters was not embodied formally in an oath.

again, Jephthah's vow ran as follows : " If thou wilt indeed deliver the children of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that, whatsoever cometh forth from the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, it shall be Jehovah's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering." We have called this a specially emphatic way of praying, for when the vow accompanied a petition, and when it was made conditional upon God's granting the petition, it showed how much a man was in earnest in craving such and such a boon ; so much that he was prepared to give the tenth of his income or property as a thank offering ; or else, that he was prepared to sacrifice as a thank offering the first thing, or even *person*, that met him on his return home. Of course, in making these private appeals to God, men did not suppose they could absolutely insure his granting their prayers. They offered God, indeed, special inducements, as the symbols of a specially grateful devotion ; but it remained within his free choice either graciously to listen to their prayers and accept the gifts which their vows offered him, or else in mysterious coldness to turn away his face. All this may seem to us too selfish, too commercial ; yet the most spiritual psalmists of Israel favor the vow even when they frown upon sacrifice ; and we are probably safe in understanding their partiality for vows as due to their interest in personal religion. For many ages religion belonged chiefly to the state, or the tribe, or the king ; it was only on rare occasions and by curious methods that a personal link was established between the individual worshiper and his God, and that personal piety which is the heart of all religions began its gracious work upon human character. " Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats ? Offer unto God thanksgiving, and pay thy vows to the most high ; and call upon me in the day of trouble ; I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me." Not animal sacrifice, but prayer, praise, and the vow—that is the religious programme of Ps. 50. No doubt, as time went on, the element of bargain, which seemed so strange to a Christian, *e. g.*, in Jacob's vow, might disappear. The vow would then be a simple and unconditional promise to do something, or abstain from something, for

God's sake; and it would still be a personal link between the worshiper and heaven. Perhaps this kind of vow is contemplated in Deut., chap. 23. "When thou shalt vow a vow," we there read at the twenty-first verse: "Thou shalt not be slack to pay it; it would be sin in thee. But," says the next verse, "if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee." Here the vow is spoken of as if it were a "free-will offering," pure and simple. But again and again in the Psalms we find that the vow has been part of the mechanism of prayer. The sufferer in the twenty-second psalm—one of the most spiritual passages in the Old Testament—speaks of his deliverance thus: "I will pay my vows before them that fear him." So in the one hundred and sixteenth psalm: "Then called I upon the name of Jehovah; Jehovah, I beseech thee, deliver my soul." And afterward, when the prayer has been heard: "I will pay my vows unto Jehovah, yea, in the presence of all his people." In both these psalms the vows spoken of have accompanied the exercise of prayer for deliverance. And in Ps. 61 we read, in so many words: "Thou, O God, hast heard my vows;" just as we might say, Thou hast heard my prayers. But whether the vow formed part of a special appeal to God in the shape of a proposed covenant, or bargain, which was indorsed by God's granting the prayer of his servant, or whether the vow was simply an unconditional promise, in either case the worshiper found himself obliged to perform what his vow had freely offered. And the third commandment protects the personal vow as well as the judicial oath. He who has thus chosen to invoke the name of God will not be held guiltless if he has drawn near to God with false promises.

These, or such as these, are probably the earliest and most fundamental applications of the third commandment. More than with either of them, however, we are apt to connect it with the prohibition of another sin—the sin of profane swearing. In the natural history of sin that particular offense arises later on. It is a new transgression of the reverence due to God.

Blasphemy, as a secondary development of perjury, owes its origin to the fact that God's providence does not usually visit the perjured man with immediate punishment. At first, when

the appeal to God was introduced, men probably expected that God's judgment would fall upon the perjurer, if not instantly, yet certainly within a short time. We must always remember that the ten commandments came to us from an age before there was any clear revelation of immortality, whether in the form of future rewards or in that of future punishments. The promise of the fifth commandment is a promise of long life in the land given to Israel by his God. The threat of the second commandment speaks of God's continuing to visit sin, not upon the soul of the dead sinner, but upon his children and posterity. And the threat of the commandment now before us—"Jehovah will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain"—probably intimates that the false swearer, though he may for the moment deceive men, shall soon be blighted with the manifest curse of God. There is at least one law in the Pentateuch which shows how lively an expectation was cherished in Israel of immediate supernatural judgments by God upon sin. It is the law describing the ordeal (as we may call it) which a jealous husband was permitted to impose upon his wife. The suspected woman was brought before the priest, was made to drink a potion of holy water sprinkled with dust from the floor of the tabernacle, and was made to assent, in the words "Amen, Amen," to an oath, or a curse, recited in God's name by the priest. "If thou hast gone aside, and if thou be defiled . . . Jehovah make thee a curse and an oath among thy people, . . . and this water, that causeth the curse, shall go into thy bowels, and shall make thy belly to swell and thy thigh to fall away." This ordeal, then, with its special appeal to God, was imposed in the belief that the innocent could safely undergo it, but that God would certainly bring upon the guilty the dreadful curse described. However we may understand the operation of such an ordeal—as a superstition, or a standing miracle, or as a means of terrifying the guilty—there can be little doubt that the Hebrews looked for what we should call a miracle, in protection both of the ordeal and of the oath.

But, think as we may of so rare a usage as the ordeal, we shall hardly be prepared to admit that there ever was a time

when each judicial oath infallibly discovered truth and was enforced by miraculous sanctions. At first, indeed, the oath would defend itself. Men believing in the supernatural terrors of God more firmly than in any second cause or natural law would shudder at the very thought of defying God and of calling down his vengeance by deliberately swearing what they knew to be false. He must have been no common criminal who first was guilty of perjury—of perjury not due to passion or prejudices, but to the deliberate choice of a poisoned weapon for saving oneself or for ruining one's enemy. Most sins have their root in the shameful weakness of human nature. Most sins blind the eyes of the transgressor with some thin sophistry: "Ye shall not surely die." But at times temptation induces men to sin with their eyes wide open. Though it should cost me my eternal salvation, I must and will have that; I must not and will not be deprived of the other, for which I have schemed and toiled and suffered year after year; does duty now interpose a barrier between me and my chosen good? then I will trample on duty; does my idol fail to promise me happiness? there is, I suspect, no happiness for me; but this thing, happy or miserable, I will have; are there dreadful risks? But I will brave all risks, nay, all certainty of evil; only, I will not be defeated.—May God keep us from such an hour of the power of darkness. In some such mood, surely, must the first perjurer have gone about his deed; not with the easy calculation of the skeptic, but desperately, deliberately, maddened by the love of sin, pulling down the pillar upon which society rested, setting God at defiance, challenging all the powers of earth and heaven to do their worst, and expecting that they would do it, with only a half conjecture lurking deep in his mind that perhaps conscience lied, and tradition doted, and authority conspired with them—that perhaps the determined longings of his sinful heart would find allies in some quarter of the spiritual world; but, at any rate, let the issue be the worst, his secret should not be dragged from him; he would not be robbed of his prize; he would not be balked of sweet vengeance. For a sufficient price men have been believed to sell their souls to the devil in cold blood. For

a sufficient price, in a spirit of mad wilfulness, deaf to all calculation, the first perjurer defied God and swore his lie.

He lived; he breathed; he was safe! Days passed; months rolled away; he knew no change!

The sky, that noted all, made no disclosure;
And the earth kept up her terrible composure.

For some men fear and silence would be more than enough. Against the weak the threat of the third commandment would defend itself; they would tremble, quiver, hesitate, and, sooner or later, break down. But the first perjurer—the daring rebel who feared not God nor regarded man—was far from being a weakling; and all such dangers passed him by. Again, sometimes in the course of Providence, or what we call accident, a bolt from the blue would fall so aptly upon the transgressor, at the moment when he felt most secure, as to seem, to his own guilty conscience and to the suspicion of his neighbors, nothing else than God's just judgment. And, when human justice is exercised with any degree of intelligence, the liar or perjurer runs the risk of being found out. Yet all these safeguards fall short of security. In spite of them all, oaths are broken and perjurers enjoy immunity. Even in Old Testament times experience taught this lesson; and we meet with complaints in our Bibles that God, to whom vengeance belonged, did not “show himself.” The simple belief with which the Old Testament started, that every sin was followed before long by its appropriate punishment, was altogether too simple to match the facts as a whole. “My lord cardinal,” said the French queen, “God Almighty does not pay every Saturday night, but he pays.” The decalogue comes to us from a time when men believed that God paid, so to speak, every Saturday night. The experience of the contrary was part of the deep and tortuous and painful teaching by which God educated his chosen people for the revelation of a future life. In the light of our Christian hopes and fears we can see that his government is more truly moral, and therefore more worthy of him, because for a time—only for a time—he seems to hold those guiltless who have broken his commandments.

It being thus proved, to the astonishment and delight of sinners, that perjury was sometimes safe enough, the crime grew popular. That goblin-haunted wilderness into which, with throbbing heart and ringing ears, the first perjurer burst his way soon lost its solitariness and became a highroad for the wicked. God did not fulfil his threats; the appeal to God lost its terrors. *These things they did, and he kept silence; they thought he was altogether such a one as themselves*—a formalist, a hypocrite, with only the show of zeal for righteousness. Hence, in confident irreverence, profanity began to show itself. Did a man doubt your word? Swear to him; appeal to God at your own instance; your oath might carry conviction where a clever tale was doubted, and, if not, you were no worse off than before; it was a foolish old-world superstition that God listened to oaths, and kept the swearer to his word. Profane swearing is at first, therefore, an amateur form of perjury—a peculiarly ingratiating and peculiarly offensive lie; then it sinks into a mere form of emphasis. When profanity grows common, it raises the doubt whether the judicial oath is now a thing of much value. Judicial oaths are a means of extracting truth. In the presence and dread of God, it is believed that even a liar will speak frankly; and so no doubt it was at one time. But when men have so entirely lost reverence for the thrice holy name as to employ it lightly, trivially, even falsely—when they swear by God in common speech merely for the sake of spice and emphasis—can judicial oaths do much to unlock the secrets of men's hearts? If a profane man is unusually truthful in the witness box, what makes him so—the fear of God, or the fear of the police? Judgment to come, or the law against perjury? If solemn affirmations are an insufficient substitute for the oath, surely the religious sanction might be preserved in some better form than that obsolescent type which has run wild, choking our fields and highways with the weed of profanity.

There can be no doubt that the third commandment, while protecting the oath and the vow, forbids and excludes profane swearing. Nothing is more inconsistent with reverence, or does more direct dishonor to the holy name of God. Yet it is doubt-

ful how far profanity was common in Old Testament times. Deliberate apostasy (Lev. 24:11; Job 2:9) is a very different sin; the relish of swearing consists in the profaning of one's own sacred hopes and fears. Such a sin belongs to later and more artificial ages. With all their faults, the Hebrew people were too simple, too primitive, too full of instinctive reverence and unquestioning faith, to trespass much in that direction. No doubt a great deal is recorded which would be condemned as profane by our more advanced New Testament standard. Thus David, when he heard of Nabal the Carmelite's refusal to pay blackmail to the exile and his guerilla band of police, burst into execrations against Nabal, and against himself, if he failed to take vengeance upon the niggard.³ We should call David's words neither very reverent nor very decent. Abigail heard of the danger, and came out to meet David with propitiatory presents and still more propitiatory flatteries—the wily woman and the handsome young outlaw understood each other at once; with many compliments David announced that, for her sake, and for the sake of God, who had acted in providence through her, he would keep nothing of the vow, which he had rashly taken, to massacre Nabal and the men of his household. But what, then, of the curses which David had invoked on his own head? Certainly that appeal to God was made with levity and set aside again with levity. Still, David had been in earnest at the moment when he invoked the divine name; he had not developed the swearer's habitual impiety, and it is doubtful whether the historian, who records the events, sees anything wrong in David's conduct. Again, we have a celebrated instance of cursing in the Old Testament when Shimei, the son of Gera, came out to meet David as he fled from Absalom. It is an extraordinary picture, the man's hatred found vent for itself in throwing stones at the fugitive king and his little train of followers, as well as in uttering

³ In our existing Hebrew text, David's curses are destined for the "enemies of David," if he fails to take vengeance. Very characteristically, the Jewish scribes felt shocked to write words of cursing on David, and gave the thing a seemlier turn. The analogy of similar imprecations elsewhere, and the logic of the process, agree with those ancient translations (Syriac and Arabic) in which the verse is found to restore the true reading. See THENIUS, *in loc.*

vigorous curses against them in God's name. An extraordinary picture, to which we can find no pendant except Shimei's abject submission to the same man, a few days later, when the logic of circumstance had declared that David, after all, and not Absalom, was God's favorite. Still, Shimei was at the time when he spoke perfectly in earnest. Absolutely convinced that he was on God's side, and that God was on his side, he gave the reins to his hatred, and heaped up pious curse upon pious curse. Only an oriental, and an oriental with morbid developments of conscience, could find so exquisite a relish in kicking a man when he was down. A most unbeautiful exhibition of human nature—but not exactly profane! Indeed, throughout the Old Testament we find that imprecations and execrations are made use of in all seriousness. The usage became so rooted in language that, when, in Ps. 95, God is represented as swearing, his oath takes the form of an imprecation. Literally, the closing words run: "So I swear in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest." English readers know the phrase from the epistle to the Hebrews, where a quotation from the literal rendering of the psalm in the LXX is again literally rendered in English by the A. V. Now, this phrase, fully filled in, would read, "God bring judgment on me, if they shall enter into my rest"—a strange form of language to attribute to God himself! We may even doubt whether such expressions are fully consistent with reverence as taught by Christ. But in Old Testament ages we find them used in all seriousness; they are imbedded in the structure of the Hebrew language and in the literature of inspiration.

For the first Bible instance of profanity, as we know it, we must probably come down to the New Testament and to the life of Simon Peter. A strange distinction for an apostle! But let us remember that Peter is not so plain a type of profanity as he is a pattern of deep and humble repentance.